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ABSTRACT

This two-page fact sheet summarizes typical approaches, programs, and resources in the area of family support and respite programs for families with special needs. Principles of family support programs are listed, stressing the common goal of increasing the ability of families to successfully nurture children. Typical components of such programs are also listed, including life skills training, parent information classes and support groups, information and referral services, auxiliary support services, and advocacy. Principles of crisis nursery and respite care programs are identified, such as provision of services to families rather than to individuals, provision of an array of services, emphasis on family strengths rather than weaknesses, governance that includes parents, and cultural awareness. (DB)

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Family Support Services

Introduction

Dramatic changes have occurred in the structure and patterns of family life in the United States over the past twenty years. For example, families have become increasingly mobile, and parents often function without help from extended family. Family support services have emerged in response to these changes. The settings in which family support services operate vary widely, as do the services and resources they offer to families. *However, all family support services are geared toward a common goal: increasing the ability of families to successfully nurture their children.*

A family support approach is based on the following precepts:

- Families have primary responsibility for their children's development and well being; they need resources and supports that will enable them to fulfill that responsibility effectively.
- Healthy families are the foundation of a healthy society. Families which are unable to promote their children's development ultimately place the entire society at risk.
- Families operate as part of a total system. Children cannot be viewed as separate from their families, nor can families be viewed separately from their communities, their cultural heritage, or the society at large. Decisions made on behalf of children must take into account the ways in which these various systems are interconnected.
- The systems and institutions upon which families rely for support must assist families' efforts to effectively raise their children. They must adjust and coordinate their services so that they do not hinder families' abilities to maintain positive environments for their children.

Typical Components of Family Support Programs

Family support programs operate successfully in diverse communities and settings. Some are separate, freestanding nonprofit agencies; others are part of a larger organization and are sponsored by churches, hospitals, schools, day-care centers, state agencies, or colleges and universities. Specific program content and structure are determined by the needs of the families being served, and are designed to complement already existing community services and resources. Most family support programs include the following:

- Life skills training. This may include family literacy, education, employment and vocational training, or personal development skills such as problem solving, stress reduction, and communication.
- Parent information classes and support groups. These provide instruction in child development and opportunities for parents to share their experiences and concerns with peers.
- Parent-child groups and family activities, which provide occasions for parents to spend more time with their children.
- Child care for parents who are participating in a particular class or activity.
- Newsletters and other communication tools providing information on programs, activities, and available resources for families.
- Information and referral services.
- Crisis intervention/family counseling to respond to parents' special concerns about their children or specific family issues.
- Auxiliary support services such as clothing exchanges, emergency food, transportation.
- Advocacy for individual families and for all families within the community.

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Family Support Services and Crisis Nursery and Respite Care Programs

Crisis nursery and respite care programs offer temporary child care and other family support services to families. Many crisis nursery and respite care programs operate according to family support principles. One general characteristic of many crisis nursery and respite care programs, which is in keeping with family support principles, is that services are offered to families instead of to individuals. For example, respite care may provide a break from child care for parents, an opportunity for siblings to spend special time alone with parents, and an opportunity for children with disabilities to experience new activities and make new friends.

Crisis nursery and respite care programs frequently offer an array of other services to families. Often, this is accomplished by broadening the range of services through collaboration with other organizations, a second characteristic of family support. The types of auxiliary services available should reflect the needs of families in the community. One crisis nursery offers information and referral, as well as crisis counseling, as part of a community-wide collaboration of agencies in a local child abuse prevention network. Representatives of agencies in the network meet once a month to plan needed services such as medical care, transportation, and child care.

A third characteristic of crisis nursery and respite care programs based on family support principles is that the services build on the strengths of families instead of focusing on weaknesses. For example, crisis nurseries may offer parenting classes, caregiving breaks, and structured family time. Staff may also assist parents in identifying family strengths and developing a plan to help ensure sufficient resources and support for the family.

Governance that includes parents is a key element of family support services in all types of programs, including crisis nursery and respite care programs. Families should be involved as a part of the program's development and planning, and as members of the governing body. Local, state, and regional committees should include a significant number of parents representing the families they serve. Advisory groups composed of parents and staff can also provide guidance in planning programs, policies and procedures, and service delivery.

Cultural awareness is another important characteristic of family support within crisis nursery and respite care programs. Families must be supported within the context of their cultural heritage. Differences should be respected and appropriately addressed. Services can be offered by bilingual staff, and activities such as parenting classes should include a multicultural perspective.

Summary

The philosophy and concept of family support blends well with crisis nursery and respite care services. Considering the needs of the whole family, these types of programs strengthen families and support them in their movement towards health and self-reliance. Family support services are available in many communities through collaborative agreements with a family resource center, government agencies, or other non-profit health and human service agencies.

Resources

Family Resource Coalition, 200 S. Michigan Ave., Suite 1520, Chicago, IL 60604, (312) 341-0900. The Family Resource Coalition promotes family support principles with the provision of technical assistance, research, and information.

The ARCH National Resource Center for Crisis Nurseries and Respite Care Services, 800 Eastowne Drive, Suite 105, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514, (919) 490-5577. The ARCH National Resource Center provides technical assistance and training to crisis nursery and respite care projects, encouraging the family support philosophy and principles.

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